

1943-1944: The CNT and the liberation of Paris

Information about the role that members of the Spanish anarchist trade union the CNT played in the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation.

"ALGERIAN

SOUTH-EASTERN FRONT, NORTHERN GROUP, NUM, 93D/31,

M'DILLA, 12TH APRIL, 1943.

Extract of order No. 38.

Colonel Delmay of Garenne, commanding the northern group of the south-eastern Algerian front dictates:

'Abenza Jesus, legionnaire in the 3rd R-I Elite mine-detector pioneer, who brilliantly distinguished himself in the advance on 7th April 1943, clearing a passage in front of the battle tanks across numerous minefields proving great courage and total disregard to danger.' Colonel Delmay of Garenne, commander of the Northern Group of the south-eastern front."

At the end of the Spanish Civil War and Revolution, Jesus was at the Madrid front and was unable to cross into France until the beginning of 1941. At Perpignan, he was sentenced to one month's imprisonment for having illegally crossed the border. He was imprisoned at Argeles from where he was deported to Algeria.

"It was there that I decided to volunteer for the French African Corps with whom I did the whole Tunisian campaign. I then joined in the Marching Brigade which later became the Chad Marching Regiment, and which became famous in all the battles against Rommel's forces in Africa. At the end of the African war I continued in Free French Forces. We left Casablanca on 4th April 1944, landing at Swansea on the 22nd. After staying in numerous military camps, we embarked on a 'liberty ship' to Normandy on July 31st.

Having been made a sergeant by General Leclerc it was with braids (which meant nothing to me), that I fought across France and Germany before entering Paris. General Leclerc assembled the 9th Company, practically all Spanish and C.N.T., and made the following speech: 'Soldiers of Free France and foreign fighters for the freedom of France. Our Division that covered itself in glory in thousands of actions should be the first to enter Paris. Because I know that you will not retreat and that you place very highly the honour of the Division I am giving you the order (Ninth Company of Foreign Volunteers) to be at the head of the Forces and the first to liberate Paris'.

This is what happened. We were the first to enter Paris.

The first cannon installed at the Hotel de Ville (Town Hall) square, I was responsible for. We called it 'El-Abuelo' (Grandad). The tanks and armoured cars were 'Ascaso', 'Darrail', 'Casa Vieja', 'Jeruel'... and in front we flew the Spanish Republican flag as authorised by the commander"

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account

by Jesus Abenza

As well as directly participating in the liberation of Paris, Spanish anarchists took part in the armed struggle against Franco's fascist regime in Spain, and fought in the French Resistance throughout the occupation . In the Second Armoured Division (2emeDB) of Leclerc, the Spanish formed entire companies which together practically formed an entire Battalion - the 3rd Chad Marching Regiment. Of note was the 9th Company, 'La Nueve' as comrades called it, which was almost totally made up of libertarian militants of the anarchist union the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) and Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI).

"The Spanish contingent in the Leclerc column was so important that General Leclerc himself revered the 9th Company of the RMT and saluted the Spanish Republican flag they bore. This happened in August 1943 near Djidjelli.

This Company was entirely composed of Spaniards, including officers. In other companies, there were about 60 % Spanish ... We landed in France the 1st - 3rd August 1944 on the Normandy coast. There, many of us fell, particularly at the infamous sealing-off of the 'Falaise Pocket'...At the Echouche Cemetery (Normandy), great numbers of Spanish refugees fell in the heavy fighting...

The first tanks to enter had Spanish names. The Free French Forces thought we were Americans, and as we spoke French badly, there was a possibility of confusion. We said: 'We're not Americans, we're not English, we are Spanish and refugees.' On the morning of the 25th we moved off towards the barracks at Place de la Republique. Much Spanish blood ran again on the route from the Town Hall to the Pl. Republique."

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Account by V.Echegaray)

The odyssey of the 2eme DB did not end in Paris, but continued in campaigns in Alsace and Lorraine. The 9th distinguished itself brilliantly in the Moselle, at the liberation of Strasbourg on the 23rd September, and then at the battles in Germany, passing through the concentration camp at Dachau (liberated by the Americans) and the ultimate stop being the capture of Hitler's 'Eagles Nest' in Berchtesgarden where the Spanish were the first to enter.

The massive presence of libertarian militants in the 2eme DB, and particularly the 9th Company, can be easily explained if you take into account that for many of them it followed that once France was liberated, it would be Spain's turn.

Comrade Manuel Lozano, who was given the Military Cross by Leclerc for his part in the 9th's campaigns, explains:"We joined up with Leclerc's Division because we thought that after France we would be off to liberate Spain. In my Company, La Nueve, everybody was ready to desert with all the equipment. Campos, the Commander of the 3rd section, was in contact with the guerrillas of

the Union Nationale who were fighting in the Pyrenees.

But the Union Nationale was swamped by the Communists, and we had to reject it ... Had the Communists not been dominant, then the Company would have joined, and not only the Company, but all the other Battalions with Spanish refugees.

We had everything worked out. The lorries full of equipment, fuel, we'd have gone as far as Barcelona. And then, who knows if the history of Spain wouldn't have been different..."

Always with the continuation of the struggle in Spain in mind, the comrades of La Nueve had organised the systematic recuperation of arms on battlefields. Two half-tracks were used for this purpose, and weapons gained were partly stored in the small workshop that Manuel Fernandez, an elderly Forestry Union militant, had set up near Montpellier, for use by action groups that infiltrated Spain at that time.

Finally it must be noted that the official historians have been strangely silent about the role of the Spanish in the Resistance generally, and Leclerc's army in particular. From 1946 Adrien Dansette denied the presence of the Spanish, pretending they were Moroccans! No references to Spanish can subsequently be found either in the work of Lapieffe, Collins, or Michel. Even Captain Raymond Dronne who was the Commander of the 9th Company, hardly mentions them in his book on the liberation of Paris - whilst in his campaign log (reproduced in Spanish, but unpublished in French to our knowledge) he frequently, and often with emotion, recalls these fighters mainly from the CNT-FAI. Is this silence voluntary or just by chance? In any case, the participation of foreigners, (Be they Spanish or German antifascists, Polish refugees, Jewish fighters, Algerian, Kanak or Senegalese infantry), in the fight for liberation, has been systematically minimised when it hasn't been pure and simply erased, allowing for an image of the French being liberated by themselves - a theory allowing easily the establishment of a very large national consensus and toning down the extent of collaboration with the occupying Nazis.

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